

MasterChef's Gregg Wallace and John Torode judge competitors of MasterChef Live's Invention Test, under the watchful eye of compère Andy Peters



A man in a blue sweater is speaking into a microphone on a stage. In the background, another man in a white apron with the name 'Chris' is visible. The setting appears to be a kitchen or a stage for a culinary event.

FOOD HEAVEN

We uncover the secrets of London Olympia's upcoming culinary extravaganza, MasterChef Live, and talk exclusively to one of the show's star judges John Torode.

Words: Fiona Collins

For true food lovers, there is surely no better day out than to wander the aisles of one of the country's leading gastronomic festivals, living, breathing, eating and absorbing all things food. Wholesome cheeses, handmade chocolates, fresh breads, exotic spices, pickles, chutneys, sauces and marinades...and all that before you start on the wines.

However, the introduction of the MasterChef element into what was formerly the BBC's annual Good Food Show, has turned a grown up celebration of culinary excellence into a family-friendly food frenzy.

"I've talked to visitors with boys and girls as young as 11 and 12, and the adults have said 'Oh they made me go, they really wanted to come and see the show,' which is amazing! If we're influencing and getting children of that age coming to a really, really fabulous celebration of great food and entertainment, then that's a much nicer day out than sitting in and playing computer games!"

So says Laura Biggs, Managing Director of BBC Haymarket, the brains behind this year's event. Such is the event's dedication to its young fan base,

that on the Sunday of the three-day extravaganza kids go free, with a special parent and child 'invention test' pitting families against each other in the ultimate winner-takes-all cook off.

"Obviously kids love food," continues Biggs.

"And there are some amazing, amazing delicious foods here. Last year there were more cupcakes than you could throw a stick at – I imagine it will be macarons this year! And the demonstrations are really interesting, and it's great fun because of all the live theatres, so as a family it's a great day out."

This is not to say that the food lover has been forgotten in the cross-over to the new format, which made its successful debut in 2009; quite the opposite, in fact.

"We have over 250 exhibitors who will come to the show, and more than half of them are speciality producers; tiny little producers of the most fantastic foods. And generally the exhibitors love to have a chat and that's what they're there for," says Biggs.

"That's one of the great things about the show, that you can meet the people behind the product, which you wouldn't necessarily be able to do in your local

store. The exhibitors will tell you exactly how they've made their cheese for example, how long it's matured, and where the cow's come from! Or the ladies who hand-make the chocolates and tell you exactly what's in them all."

One addition to this year's show, which is most certainly not aimed at the younger audience, is MasterChef Live's new partnership with The Wine Show, which formerly took place each year in Islington. With tickets now interchangeable between the two events Biggs says that the experience is not just about enjoyment, but education too.

"We'll have over 150 wines here for people to try, and we'll have wine talks, and wine walks, and of course a fabulous bar. It's a great place if you're looking to get inspiration for how you pair wines with different foods, and it will be very integrated."

In addition, The Restaurant Experience ("the ultimate celebration of gourmet food") - in which ten of London's leading restaurants will cook up tester menus for visitors to try - is sponsored by Hardys Wine, who have paired every dish on offer with one of their own tipples. →



Then of course there's the MasterChef element itself. "The big feature of the show is the Invention Test," says Biggs. "It's basically replicating the first round of the TV programme where contestants have 30 minutes to make a dish from a bag of mystery ingredients. It's the only place where the public can have a go and do that."

Promising all the glitz and glamour of the TV show itself, the Invention Tests will run throughout the days (but be sure to pre-reserve your entry), and will be compered by Andy Peters in front of a live audience. Former MasterChef contestants such as 2010 winner Dhruv Barker will mentor each of the competitors on stage, while TV judges John Torode and Gregg Wallace will be on hand to deal out the prizes.

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"It's nerve-wracking I have to say," says Biggs who admits to giving it a go last year. "But when you get out there it's great, great fun!"

And if that's not enough excitement, there is also the MasterChef Demonstration Stage, and the Chef's Theatre featuring the likes of James Martin, Rick Stein and Michel Roux Jr. Or you could just sidle up to one of the stars and get some tips all of your own. I ask Biggs whether the famous culinary names are shielded from the public at the event, "No quite the opposite actually, we have to pull them away to go to their next thing; they're all very approachable at the show!"

As Biggs says: "If you love food it is the ultimate day out; it is gastronome heaven; it's a day out of great entertainment. Unless you are on a diet, I don't think you could have a bad day at MasterChef Live!"

MasterChef Live takes place in the Grand Hall at Olympia in London, on 12-14 November 2010. For more information visit www.londonbbcgoodfoodshow.com

Above left: A contestant in the Invention Test dishes up for the judges.
Above right: Say cheese! One of the 250 exhibitors on show at MasterChef Live

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW: JOHN TORODE

There's more to the man than a dislike of scallops on pea puree!

My interview with John Torode is squeezed between an 8am appearance on GMTV, and the beginning of the day's filming for the final few episodes of *Celebrity MasterChef*. Torode is businesslike in his approach, shooting back no-nonsense answers to my questions, and – without prompting – spelling out the names of people and restaurants, which he suspects might trip me up. “I worked with a guy called John Gench G-E-N-C-H, in a place called Tsindos T-S-I-N-D-O-S,” Torode says, rapid fire, when I ask him of his culinary apprenticeship in his native Australia. Here is a man who has done an interview or two in his time. His approach is professional, almost blunt, but he has a schedule to stick to and clearly knows what is needed for the interview to succeed.

Much as he is on *MasterChef*, today Torode is largely deadpan in his responses, with the odd glimmer of dry humour: “In the late 90s I used to be the resident chef on *This Morning* on a Friday and Saturday with Richard and Judy, and because I was so attractive they wanted me for television,” he pauses then chuckles, when I ask him how he made the transition from chef to TV personality.

After learning the ropes in Melbourne, Torode did what many young Aussies seem to do and headed north, taking up positions in some of London's best known restaurants including Quaglino's and Bluebird. As Torode himself acknowledges, times have changed. “The fact is, that people in the UK have decided that they actually quite like food, whereas when I first arrived twenty years ago, I don't think that they really liked it. I think they used to go out for occasions and sit opposite each other, and talk about nothing; those sort of grand dining rooms with silence running through them.”

“Now people go out to eat and to enjoy themselves and have fun, and eating out is no longer just about eating plates of food, it's about going out with mates and having a good time.”

One thing has remained constant though, and that is



the role of commercial kitchen. Despite the apparent pressure and chaos of these culinary centres, captured on shows like *MasterChef*, Torode says that professional cooks are actually immensely focussed and organised.

“In a commercial kitchen you're a trained cook and you're part of a team in the same way that a football

team will have a winger. In a commercial kitchen you only do a certain job – you might only cook three dishes, and that's all you do for three months.” By contrast, Torode says, the turmoil and stress displayed on *MasterChef* stems from the fact that cooks are asked to produce multiple dishes across multiple disciplines - without training - in a limited timeframe. →

John Torode and fellow judge Gregg Wallace pose for the cameras in the MasterChef kitchen.



“Masterchef is a competition about watching people grow, about challenging people, and about challenging their perceptions of their own abilities. I think the pressure is absolutely enormous because it’s about self-achievement, self-belief, and about having the guts to put your food up and your personality on a plate and say to Gregg (Wallace) and I, ‘What do you think?’”

I am interested to know whether Torode himself would, as an aspiring young chef, have risen to the challenge of contesting his own show?

“I would probably never answer that question for the simple reason it’s not part of my psyche.” I’m not entirely sure what he means by this, but I think it means no! He elaborates: “I started off washing dishes and mopping floors, and worked my way up to being able to make chocolates, to doing the basics, that’s what I set out to do. I think MasterChef is a very, very different thing altogether. I think MasterChef is about people who already have a love and a passion for food, who want to go and do something new and interesting and something which is really, really exciting.”

But sometimes, as Torode and co-presenter Gregg Wallace’s grimacing reactions contest, they clearly don’t find every dish ‘really, really exciting.’ ‘Are there any dishes which you dread being made on the show?’ Aspiring MasterChefs take note: “The beloved

chocolate fondant will always be the death knell of somebody. Presently, scallops, pea puree and black pudding seems to be one of those things that everybody loves to do, but actually really doesn’t involve very much. I think the idea of chicken wrapped in ham filled with cheese; that seems to be one of those ones that you think, ‘Oh no, please don’t do that one again’, and when somebody says to me they’re going to be cooking chips, because invariably they don’t have a thermometer, they don’t have the time, and they don’t have the patience, because they actually take quite a long time to do properly.”

My time is nearly up; the next media appointment beckons. ‘One final question, sorry, I know you’ve got to get on.’ “Yeh, right!” Broad Aussie emerges for a second. I ask whether Torode actually enjoys the MasterChef Live experiences; whether he enjoys meeting the show’s adoring public.

“We are very fortunate with MasterChef...we’ve got a great viewing public and we want them to come and meet us. They’ve got to understand we’re real people, but then also with MasterChef Live they have the ability to get involved. They can come and do the Invention Test, they can come and watch demonstrations, they can see other competitors. But more importantly they can come and be inspired, and they can go and buy the produce from various suppliers and all the equipment that goes with it, and they can go home and replicate it themselves.”

Aside from his TV work, Torode now owns two successful London restaurants, Smiths of Smithfields, and The Luxe in Commercial Street, which, according to one noted critic, ‘sits in a little gastrocluster of aching trendiness.’ A fitting analogy for Torode himself perhaps, for, as he says: “Human nature dictates that we all like to impress each other, we all like to show off a little bit, and you know food is a very, very good way of doing that.”

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